

Business

Utility Pole Rules Could Help High-Speed Internet Access



As Connecticut seeks to boost high-speed Internet, the state's top consumer advocate is moving in a new direction, asking regulators to approve a rule for municipalities to use utility poles for broadband wiring.

By **Stephen Singer** · Contact Reporter

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MANCHESTER — As Connecticut seeks to boost high-speed internet, the state's consumer advocate is asking state regulators to establish rules for municipalities to use utility poles for expanded broadband access.

The poles are owned by electric utilities such as Eversource and telecommunications companies, including Frontier Communications Corp., which took possession of the poles when it purchased AT&T's Connecticut franchise in 2014. The poles typically carry telephone and electric lines and cable TV wiring.

Advocates for broader access to high-speed internet now want the ubiquitous poles — about 900,000 in Connecticut — to be used for broadband taken directly to homes and businesses.

State law enacted in 2013 allowed municipalities access to the poles "for any use," broadening previous

language in agreements between municipalities and utilities or telecommunications firms that allowed government use only, said Jack McCoy, Manchester's chief information officer.

Manchester, for example, runs 44 miles of internet wiring linking schools, police stations, fire departments, senior citizen centers and other agencies. Broader use of utility poles could bring fiber optic service — which increases speed and capacity tremendously — from those sites to nearby homes and businesses.

Elin Swanson Katz, the state's consumer counsel, has asked the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority to establish rules that would be used in a standard agreement between municipalities and telecommunications companies and utilities. New rules would make it easier for municipalities to negotiate high-speed broadband access and, McCoy said, would include the requirement in state law allowing municipalities' access to poles "for any use."

"The process is daunting and in some circumstances clear as mud," Katz said. "That whole process needs to be clarified."

New rules also would clarify who must assess the condition of utility poles, ready them for new attachments and allocate the costs to prepare the poles for an added use, the consumer counsel's office said.

Frontier said in a statement it supports state and municipal efforts to improve and expand access to advanced telecommunications and policies and initiatives that promote competition. Without elaborating, it said regulators and public agencies should not back policies that give a competitor an unfair advantage.

A spokeswoman for Eversource said the utility supports increasing access to high-speed internet in Connecticut if the equipment attached to utility poles meets safety and engineering standards and installation costs are not "unfairly shifted" to its customers.

Vinni Quast, president and chief executive officer of Quast Media, a digital advertising agency in downtown Manchester, said he'd welcome fiber-optic availability to boost his business. With the large amounts of data he handles, he uses cloud storage in Germany.

"To make something like that happen, you can't have broadband. You have to have fiber optic," he said.

McCoy said providing high-speed internet to homes and businesses, or fiber to the premises known as FTTP, would be the "tip of an economic mountain of new enterprise."

Katz and state Comptroller Kevin Lembo are leading a state effort to find ways to build and finance internet service of up to 1,000 megabits (1 gigabit) per second. That's nearly 100 times faster than what most home connections deliver.

The two officials have characterized high-speed internet as a critical utility, no different from electricity or home heating. They also promote it as economic development to lure and keep businesses in Connecticut, with Lembo calling it the "ultimate infrastructure development."

In her application to the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority, Katz said affordable access to high-speed internet is essential for a range of applications such as health care, financial services, transportation and public safety.

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